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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the effectivity of television lies in the complex effects it generates by operating in specific ways on the line of in-difference, i.e., a particular structure of self relationship enacted in the relation between identity and difference. Using a theoretical and critical framework, the paper presents an analysis of three television functions: reshaping the powers and pleasures of identities and differences; reworking the relationship between ideology and affect; and rearticulating the social structure and power of difference within an affective democracy. A number of popular films and television shows are discussed to illustrate these points. Other aspects explored in this paper include: (1) in-differences of context and of form; (2) fragmentation and interruption of discourses constantly appearing on and disappearing from the television screen; (3) inability of television criticism to confront the problems posed by the determination of television apparatuses; (4) postmodernism and hypermodernism; (5) irony, repetition, and excess and the three forms of in-difference they announce; and (6) in-difference of identity or meaning. (5 end notes) (CGD)

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# THE IN-DIFFERENCE OF TELEVISION or

# Mapping TV's Popular (Affective) Economy

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Paper presented to the 1986 International Television Studies Conference

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# THE IN-DIFFERENCE OF TELEVISION or, Mapping TV's Popular (Affective) Economy1

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## I. Speed Limits

The American television critic today faces what is apparently, at least judging from their rhetoric, a nightmarish landscape. Yet, we have little actual knowledge of what it is that the viewer is watching, that is, of the actual ways in which particular televisual events are inserted into and function within the social formation; we constantly assume a inherent relationship beween culture and history, thereby guaranteeing that although any particular reading may be in error, the project itself cannot be. Thus we reinscribe the privilege of our own position, a position marked by its place within various relations of power. Whether tv is seen as a reflection of late capitalism, a frighteningly trivialized representation (constitution) of social reality, the ultimate postmodern network, the unconscious made flesh (Freud's magic writing pad projected as nothing more than the commodity form), the critic places themselves outside the context. More accurately, the critic is unproblematically within it, since the position of critic is as much a necessary moment of the tv apparatus as that of viewer. Of course, the alternative seems even less desirable than elitism, for it gives up the possibility of any sustainable oppositional role for the intellectual.

Each of these is, in turn, linked with particular forms of critical practice and theory: either immersing oneself into the

textual practices of the programs and media, or retreating into the abstraction of the image as (always the same) metaphor (however literal) of our historical existence. Both make the medium--whether as meaning or image--the microcosm of reality. Two strategies dominate: to seek either nonnecessary correspondences (which are always necessarily mediated through signification) or necessary correspondences (which are not necessarily limited to the signifying). The first, which condemns television to an endless, if not undecideable, process of signification and representation, defines semiotics and cultural studies. The second, which condemns it to merely reflecting the conflation of culture, history and theory, is at the heart of poststructuralist theory and (if taken to reproduce the negation of meaning), at the heart of postmodern theory as well. One assumes media-tion, the other rejects it.

Alternatively, we might begin by remembering that the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope as much for thinking as for perception. And we might begin to theorize the media's functioning in these historical processes by acknowledging that the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce. While a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is, of course, nothing but citations from from Benjamin's seminal essay. Erasing the quotation marks is a common media practice. As a fan, I feel absolutely no compulsion to mark

these sentences as different from any other sentence on this page. As an academic--trained to respect the work as a mark of its own difference--I acknowledge it. Moreover I worry about getting it correct, inscribing its proper difference. As a fan, I don't care about it; after all, even if I had gotten the quotations wrong, you would all have understood the link. In fact, the links are as important as the quotations themselves, for if nothing else, you would have known, or better, felt, that you had heard these lines before, that they were meaningful in their citability. Similarly, whatever the meaning of Miami Vice clothes, their citability is what is at issue in their stylization: they make no claim of originality and one misses the point if one doesn't recognize that they are Miami Vice clothes. However, we are not licensed, in our performance of academic styles, to speak entirely as fans, and to do so would risk losing the possibility of articulating the difference between domination, subordination and struggle.

Consider Miami Vice, in some ways, the most interesting current program, if only because it has so easily divided the audience into fans and enemies. Miami Vice is, as its critics have said, all on the surface. And the surface is nothing but a collection of quotations from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia. It is, in some ways, the perfect televisual image, minimalist (the sparce scenes, the constant long shots, etc.) yet concrete (consider how often we are reminded of the apparent reality of its scene). The narrative is less important than the images. In Miami Vice, the

cops put on a fashion show (not only of clothes and urban spaces, but of their own "cool" attitudes) to a Top-40 soundtrack. (Importantly, it incorporates into the dominant top 40 sounds many songs that are less likely to be recognized by the general audience.) They spend their lives, not so much patrolling Miami as cruising it, only to rediscover the narrative as an afterthought in the last few minutes. Narrative closure becomes a convenience of the medium more than a demand of our lives. And the spectator as subject all but disappears in the rapid editing and rather uncomfortable camera angles. In a recent ad, it appropriated the very criticisms that have been made of it ("It's wall to wall style.") But of course, it has always flaunted its absolute in-difference to its content. When asked what was the basic rule for producing the programe, the producer responded "No earth tones."

Of course, the gestures of such irony are historically part of the media, both technological and discursive (e.g., Ernie Kovacs, Saturday Night Live, SCTV and David Letterman). Yet it is often missed by those who condemn Vice for its representation (and celebration?) of a particularly luxurious lifestyle. After all, the lifestyle of the two cops is a pose and, in some real sense, the style but not the life is theirs. Two actors posing as cops posing as "players." Crockett's famed boat and car are the property of the Miami Dade Police Department, despite the fact that he seems to go into withdrawal when confronted with the thought of losing them. And when he almost loses his car to the budget cuts, it takes an act of god (or in this case, Lt. Castillo) to restore his right to possess it. In fact, the show

makes a great deal of the problematic line between the two levels of performance. As viewers, we are never really sure which one is talking, cop or player. Moreover, the two lead actors often refer to the line, marking it as both decisive and undecideable, the only site of reality and yet, ultimately ironic. But this explains neither its popularity nor the vehemence of those who attack it. Why is dressing "like Vice" any different than the sense of style embodied within rock/youth subcultures? If the latter encode some moment of resistance, why doesn't the former? Is it merely the fact of its origin--tv, or its success--the size of its audience, or the commercial sources of the clothing, that renders it somehow inherently less capable of marking some struggle?

Such ironic gestures are common across a wide variety of programs. What once were taken as signs of seriousness--a kind of self-refexivity about the relationship between image and reality--has become an almost requisite but still cliched gesture. Let me just give one more example . Moonlighting--a sort of Film Noir video version of Miami Vice, regularly incorporates such moments into its script but without any sense they they need be jarring: e.g., the male lead Addison, rushes in to the police office to "save" his female boss. Although both are detectives, his image of "saving" in this context has apparently demanded that he become a lawyer (he performs as a lawyer, within his performance as hard-boiled detective, within his performance as a surprisingly well-educated, witty and sensitive MCP, within his performance as an actor). Whether any

of these performances are credible seems irrelevant or undecideable; the cop seem unable to decide, his partner is unconvinced. The cop says "Hey you can't just break in here like that," to which Addison responds, matter of factly, "Tell the writers." In another episode, Addison is made the star of his own tv detective series.

I point to these rather common events in order to suggest that their power and impact cannot be found if we treat them as texts to be interpreted. I propose to take them as billboards to be driven by, roadmarkers that do not tell us where we are going but merely advertise or better, announce (because they comprise and mark the boundaries, they are both the inside and the limits of) the town we are passing through. Of course, billboards do more than advertise; they are a space in which many different discourses, both serious and playful, appear. They are also sites of struggle, both institutionalized and tactical. We are not misled by the billboard, telling us that the New York Deli is two miles left at the next turnoff, into thinking that it is announcing that we are in, or even remotely near, New York. Its direct appeals, its inscribed meanings, its specific message, seem oddly irrelevant and rarely useful (whether because we are driving too quickly or because we see them everyday). It doesn't really matter whether it is another billboard for MacDonald's, an anonymous bank, Pepsi, a PSA or a political organization. It is not a sign to be interpreted, but rather, a piece of a puzzle to be assembled.

I want to suggest that interpreting the effects of popular culture, and its politics, is less like reading a book than like

driving by the Billboards that mark the system of interstate highways, county roads and city streets that is the United States. (This is not to offer the street as the only reality, for there are real events taking place off the roads--in houses, factories, jails, etc. Further, if one wants to understand the United States, a balance must be struck between the local detail and the national structures. The United States is neither New York nor Texas nor Main Street. It is, somehow, scattered amongst all of these.)

We might say that any individual billboard is in-different. It is neither built upon a radical sense of textual difference nor does it erase all difference. The billboard's identity and power somehow depend upon its own indifference to its apparent lack of difference. It is different only because it is in-different. In-difference describes a particular structure of self-relationship enacted in the relation between identity and difference. It is this notion that I wish to explore here. If semiotics teaches us that identity is constituted out of difference, and postmodernism that identity has disappeared with the erasure of difference, I want to argue that the effectivity of tv is precisely the complex effects it generates by operating, in specific ways, on the line of in-difference. Tv practices function in part within a larger context which is reshaping (1) the powers and pleasures of identities and differences and (2) the relationship between ideology and affect. Together, these define an affective economy around television. As a response to a particular historical set of events, at least a part of tv's

functioning involves rearticulating what we might describe as the social structure and power of difference within an affective democracy. In the present paper, I want only to lay out the theoretical and critical framework for such analyses, for it is necessary to get some sense of the cultural landscape before one can begin to locate particular events within it.

II. Post No Bills

The most compelling example of a critical theory which responds to the specificity of a popular medium is film theory. But film theory rests on the assumed privileging, not only of a particular apparatus, but also of a particular form of engaged subjectivity. Despite Benjamin's descriptions, film theory (and even most popular critics) act as though the viewer were engaged in a concentrative act in which they are absorbed into the world of the film.

It is irrelevant whether this is empirically accurate (what about all those kids who go to films on dates, sometimes explicitly as an occasion for making out: are they absorbed into the film, or is the film absorbed into their context) or whether it is itself constitutive of the ways in which we expect people, ourselves included, to behave while watching films.[2] Such theories do little to explain the popularity (and reaction against) diverse media events, whether ET, Rambo, Back to the Future, Out of Africa, The Color Purple, etc., or Dynasty, Hill St. Blues, Cagney and Lacey, Miami Vice, The Bill Cosby Show, MTV, mega-events, reruns, game shows, particular ads (which are hyped and watched with the same intensity as programs), wrestling (and the clones--good and bad--that have emerged). Moreover, if

we try to untangle the audiences for these, we will find a complex series of overlapping sympathies and antagonisms. And we will find little help in pre-existing sociological or political positions (e.g., the left wing critic, who like so many fans, knew he had to hate Rambo but loved it "once the shooting started;" or all those who both recognized how manipulative ET was and yet still enjoyed it). Recent work, even within film theory, has attempted to move beyond the the original position's (e.g., the classic Screen theory) inadequate assumption that its reading of the text describes the necessary effects of the text on the audience. That is say, film theory finds itself facing much the same dilemma as its sometimes nemesis, cultural studies: the problem of the gap between productive interests, textual practices, and consumption effects or, in simpler terms, the gap between encoding and decoding. This problematic is now inscribed into the heart of cultural interpretation (in a variety of disguises--e.g., intertextuality).

However, the problems of cultural interpretation are, if anything, magnified to an unprecented extent by the functioning of the mass media apparatuses. Not only is every media event mediated by other texts, but it is almost impossible to know what constitutes the bounded text which might be interpreted or which is actually consumed. It is absurd to think that anyone watches a single television show, or even a single series, just as it is absurd to think that only by watching it is one brought under its intertextual filligree. But there is even more to the intertextuality of tv, for it defines an "in-difference of

content." That is to say, the specifics of the episode are often less important than the fact of the tv's being on (e.g., at least one form of viewing involves tv fans as "couch potatoes" who often "veg out" in front of the tube rather than pay any sort of normal concentrated attention to it), or the fact of the latest installment (repeat or not) of a particular series.

Film theory correctly recognized that it was not defining a particular medium but rather, an entire apparatus defined by particular contexts of production and consumption, as well as by the technological appropriations of the medium. The very force and impact--the presence if you will--of any medium changes significantly as it is moved from one context to another (a bar, a theater, the living room, the bedroom, the beach, a rock concert--all of these are occasions of tv's delegated look and distracted glance). Each medium is then a mobile term, taking shape as it situates itself--almost always comfortably--within the different roadside rests of our lives. That is, the text is located, not only intertextually, but in an range of apparatuses as well, defined technologically but also by other social relations and activities. Thus, one rarely just listens to the radio, watches tv or even, goes to the movies--one is studying, dating, driving somewhere else, partying, etc. Not only is it the case that the "same" text is different in different contexts, but its multiple appearances are complexly intereffective.

This implies two further practices of in-difference as constitutive of the media: the in-difference of context, and of form. The first refers to the fact, not merely that people use or consume media in different ways, but that the media are

themselves inseparable from the diversity of contexts within which they are identifiable. The second marks the way that the mobility of the media constantly undermines any attempt to define them apart from and as different from particular cultural forms. What is the medium and what the form of television? what is its relation to film or video or even music? Is radio the medium and rock and roll the form? But then, what is the relationship of rock and roll on records, television, "live," etc.?

In fact, the in-difference of the media displaces the problematic of cultural theory from that of coding (encoding, decoding, transcoding) to that of the apparatus itself (articulation). Television makes this displacement particularly obvious and disconcerting, if only because the apparatuses are so complexly interrelated and so rapidly changing. (e.g., larger screens, higher quality resolution, VCRs and remote controls, stereo, cable, the incorporation of tv into public places like discos, bars and concert stadiums--where the choice of what to watch becomes self-consciously problematic). There are nevertheless some things that cut across the majority of tv apparatuses. Television viewing is a large temporal part of our lives, with prolonged viwing periods which suggests the formation of viewing habits. Certainly, this has partly determined its ordinariness, its taken-for-grantedness, its integration into the mundanities of everyday life and simultaneously, its constant interruption by and continuity with our other daily routines, activities, and social relationships. One rarely makes plans to watch tv--although it is on occasion a social event to be shared

with friends. Not since the fifties has it been privileged in anything like the ways in which "going to the movies" is. Moreover, one rarely intently gazes at tv allowing ourselves to be absorbed into the work but rather, distractedly glance at it or absorb it into our own momentary mood or position, or treat it merely as a framework of another reality (when only the character-types and narrative facts are important, as in daytime soaps). Its taken-for grantedness makes it appear trivial, an unimportant moment of our lives, one in which we certainly invest no great energy. And yet, its power to restructure the temporal and spatial aspects of our lives remains unquestionable. And it continues, a cross a broad spectrum of people and programs, to continously fascinate us. Tv makes the trivial into the important; again, the structure of in-difference appears. Tv is empowered precisely because one is comparatively in-different to it even as it is in-different to us (it doesn't demand our presence yet it is always waiting for us). It is this "in-difference of the fan" that makes even the idea of a television fan seem strange.

We might also point to the fragmentation and interruption of the discourses constantly appearing on and disappearing from the tv screen.[3] There is not doubt that this is an accurate description, both textually and phenomenologically. This does not mean, however, that segments, of whatever size, do not take on some meanings for the viewers. Television is constructed from intersecting discourses; it is an assemblage of segments which need bear no obvious relation (but can) to their most immediate context. Yet they always do have relations to other displaced

segments, and particular segments can regularly or momentarily take on relationships to one another. These connections, however, are neither necessarily part of the phenomenology of viewing, nor dependent upon the ability to read such intertextual interpretations from the screen. This fragmentation is only magnified by the interruptions built into the viewing contexts, and it is obviously increased by the emerging technological capacities to zip and zap within the programs and around the channels. This fragmentation is also evident in the secondary status tv assigns to narrative continuity, preferring to establish a limited continuity by repetition (of scenes, of issues, of images) and a broader continuity by its unique relation to itself. In that relation, television creates its own history and its own reality (as a CBS ad recently offered, "come into our world") within which programs and characters increasingly refer to each other (Nick-at-Nite now defines its viewers by their media history). This is an intertextuality that requires no elite knowledge or even, actual viewing history. It is history inscribed upon the screen, history as and within its own images.

Television criticism has yet to confront the problems posed by the determinations of tv apparatuses; it either ignores the problem entirely or else, depends upon limiting itself to a small assumed set of apparatuses defined by the conjunction of a primitive video technology (small screen, low quality reproduction, both visually and aurally), a particular domestic context (usually in a semi-public private space like the living

room) and a capitalist imperative (to sell bodies and thus, to hold the viewers' attention). The conjunction of these features is taken to explain the peculiar signifying practices of this supposedly dominant apparatus: the importance of sound (it makes sense to listen to tv on a radio; a similar connivance for cinema would be absurd, although the changing source of revenues for a film increasingly requires adjusting the ratio of image to sound); the minimalism of the image; its constant domestic framing and appeal; its ability to become "a relay of a reality already there," i.e., its apparent status as a "live" window on the world (which Ellis explains by tv's lack of voyeuristic positioning: the viewer is not in the position of the camera but rather, delegates his or her look to the camera).

But such descriptions, however insightful, still fail to question the limits and effectiveness of this apparatus, nor do they explain the fludity with which television has moved into different apparatuses, both less and more private, both higher and lower technologies, both larger and smaller screens, etc. Further, they fail to face the consequences of the fact that viewers rarely "pay attention" in the way that sponsors want, and there is little relation betwen the tv's being on, and either the presence of bodies in front of it, or even a limited concentration or interpretive activity invested in it. (Nevertheless, we continue to speak as though all of the values we can read in the text are somhow magically inscribed upon the minds of the viewers.) Nor can this descriptive/interpretive framework question the actual effects of the television or of particular viewing habits, unless it simply blames television

(through conscious or unconscious practices) for what we too often take to be the sorrowful state of political and moral consciousness in the world today.

On the other hand, approaches which attempt to understand the particular decoding or transcoding practices by which particular audiences appropriate the texts into the contexts of their own discursive competences fall prey to the ever diminishing return on sociological differences. In fact, they end up largely ignoring the determining power of the apparatus in favor of the signifying networks of connotation. That is, such theories cannot escape the problematic of meaning and representation. Their sophistication lies in the recognition of the gap between the two terms (requiring either a double articulation or a process of subject-positioning; both of these serve to describe how some meanings become empowered as representations or how some signifying practices are also ideological). Nevertheless, they still fail to take into account the radical implications of the gap between text, meaning and representation (or more broadly, the gaps between production, texts and consumption, or between interests, practices and effects.) They fail to recognize that "people making history but in coditions not of their own making" is as necessary an insight in the field of culture as it is in political economy. People are constantly struggling, however naively and ineffectively, to bring what they are given into their own contexts, to make something out of it which would give them a little more purchase on their lives, a little more control, which would enable them to

live their lives a bit more as they see fit (i.e, according to their images and desires--moral, ideological and affective).

III. Maps for Sale

If not every meaning is a representation, and not every text has representational effects, it may also be true that texts may have effects other than meaning-effects, and meanings themselves may be involved in relations other than representational. That is, the connection between a particular cultural practice and its actual effects may be a complex multiplicity of lines or articulations. But even this is too simple, for it suggests that articulations are themselves individually simple or straightforward links. Instead we must recognize, on the one hand with Hall, that articulation is always a struggle and, on the other hand, with Deleuze and Guattari, that such lines are themselves fragmented and rarely proceed in what might be represented as a straight line. A text may, in some or all contexts, have meaning effects, but it may have others (e.g., tv is rearranging the physical space of the house; laws against drugs give shape to the commodity structure of that market; lower speed limits contradict the design practices of highways); and in some contexts, meanings may have representational effects, but they may also have other effects (e.g., on our mood). Effects are always intereffective, on the way from and to other effects. That a particular meaning-effect also has a representational effect may in part be determined by other articulations (e.g., subject-positionings).

This increasingly complex and convoluted description offers the possibility of placing the media in a context of effects that

are not necessarily defined or completed by signification (i.e., it is not merely a matter of recognizing the difference between representation and fantasy), and that cannot be guaranteed in advance. One might perhaps add that meaning-effects are not a simple category: there are different forms of menaing (e.g., narrative, connotative, evaluative, reflective). The ways in which the meaningfulness of Miami Vice, Hill St. Blues and The Bill Cosby Show are defined by and matter for the fan (i.e., are effective) are quite different. This becomes even clearer if we compare such "traditional" forms of programming with MTV or wrestling. Yet in any program or form, we have to leave open the possibilities of different effective meaning-forms (e.g., a large number of people claim not to like wrestling but to watch it because they like Hulk Hogan; what then are they seeing?).

This model presents what I take to be the postmodernism of theory in Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault. One can describe it by four assumptions: (1) anti-essentialism (radical contextualism, overdetermination, no necessary guarantees); (2) a "monism of pluralities" (heterodoxy--otherness rather than difference, a theory of practices as effectivity); (3) wild realism (a materialism which recognizes the multiplicity of planes of effects); (4) articulation (the historical specificity of and struggles over structures of identity and difference). Each of these assumptions has both a theoretical and a political inflection. For example, the last points to the need to move, theoretically, between different levels of abstraction, and politically, between different levels of structures (hierarchies)

of power relations. On the other hand, the first challenges any theoretical hierarchy and demands, politically, that one not seek the high ground of elitism but always, the quicksand of the masses.

Postmodern theory also requires us to reposition ourselves in the contexts we are describing (for we are always doing more than describing) which is not the same as, but might well include, problematizing our relationship to them. Nor is it merely a case of, as Foucault might have said, "taking sides." It rather involves moving through the complexity of social positionings and social identities (which while not the same, are closely connected), of recognizing that any individual position (including that of the tv fan) is actually mobilely situated in a fluid context. Thus, being a fan does not guarantee how one watches tv or even a particular program; there is a complex set of practices and identities that are differentially distributed within particular apparatuses. They do not simply vary with the program, although that is sometimes determining (in particular contexts, one cannot talk during Hill St. Blues, while conversation during Miami Vice is often allowed if it is related to the program, and during the Superbowl, talk is requisite and not necessarily related to the game. But that all changes when one moves the tv into a different social context.) It is not merely that individuality is fragmented but rather that it functions as, and is articulated out of, a nomadic wandering through ever-changing positionings (dance fever). The critic has not only to map out the lines of this mobility but also, recognize that only by entering into this nomadic relation to the

media can they map the complex social spaces of media effects.

There are, however, at least two other ways in which the term "postmodernism" is used: as a cultural description, and as an historical description. Without directly engaging the enormous variety of discussions that have taken place on these issues, let me propose alternative terms for these (if only to avoid the temptation to slide from a common signifier--the postmodern"--to an assumed or necessary relationship between the domains, as if one could easily move from Jameson's convincing descriptions of cultural practices to Baudrillard's simulacrum to structures of late capitalism): pose-modernism and hyper-modernism (admittedly ugly terms). "Pose-modernism" refers, not to some constitutive textual structures or meanings but rather, to a set of discursive practices which are only visible in the complex articulations within and among the various cultural media. It is the media's performance of particular poses--and a pose, however artificial and local, is never constituted merely by a single instance or image. Many of these practices are, in fact, modernist, but they are articulated differently as poses within the context of the media. But if they are poses, they also relate problematically to the real (that reality is nothing but poses is, of course, a pose: nothing matters and what if it did). Thus, the fact that certain media practices clearly challenge the line between the real and the image does not tell us what its effects are, or even what the practices themselves are, in the broader contexts of different media apparatuses or social formations.

"Hyper-modernism" points to the fact that many of the historical structures and experiences that so-called postmodernists describe depend upon the continuation , although perhaps rearticulation of, many of the structures and experiences of modernity. This is not to deny the emergence of new historical events (e.g., the destructability and disposability of the earth; significant redistributions of wealth, population and power; new structures of commodity production such as infotech) and of new historical experiences (e.g., that there are no transcendental values capable of giving shape and direction to our lives, a decreased faith in progress, new kinds of pessimism and cynicism). To draw upon Hall, if reality was never as real as we have constructed it, it's not quite as unreal as we imagine it. If subjectivity was never as coherent as we imagine it, it's not quite so incoherent as we would like it to be. And if power was never as simple or monoloithic as we dream it (reproducing itself, requiring giants and magical subjects to change it), it's not quite as dispersed and unchallengeable as we fear. The specificity of the contemporary social formation is more complex than simple descriptions of the simulacrum or late capitalism suggest, although these are both real events and have real effects. I want then to use postmodern theory to help explicate the uneven and even contradictory relations between the pose-modernism of the media and the hyper-modernism of contemporary life.

IV. Hitchhiking Across America

It is time to return to billboards, although the task is qualified in the context of postmodern theory. It is important

not to confuse the project of looking at cultural practices as billboards to make visible particular levels of effects, structure and struggle, with the postmodern theoretical practice. The conflation of these two seems to be a fundamental flaw in much postmodern criticism. In the first place, one is operating at a more abstract level than that of concrete media contexts involving concrete individuals. The postmodern critics often mythologize America--they have the comfort of distance--by confusing its highways (certainly a real part), its surfaces, for its concrete social life. There is no guarantee that effects on one level will appear in a corresponding form at another level; on the other hand, they must presumably be having effects, and those who would ignore the effectivity of surfaces fail to adequately confront the media. Thus, what I am proposing would be only part of a constant struggle to describe and articulate the relations of the media to social life and history.

In the second place, while the image of billboards (perhaps like that of the simulacrum) seems to collapse reality into its surface), postmodern theory reminds us that the surface is itself plural. That something does not immediately appear on the surface neither denies its reality nor prevents it from appearing on the surface at another place, from another set of positionings. But no structure is necessarily and always "deeper" or somehow more real than that which appears on the surface. If we want to understand something that we intuitively recognize as American culture, which exists, without any essential identity, in many different local forms and contexts,

then the commitment to localism is likely to either lead into indeterminacy or some sort of phenomenological attempt to reconstruct the locale. That is, without any maps, we have no idea about how to begin moving through the local contexts. Obviously, we are not entirely without maps: economic relations, ideological relations--semiotic and psychoanalytic, psychological effects, phenomenological structures. Each potentially enables us to chart a particular set of effects and to locate particular sites of power and struggle.

But none of these seems to explain the enormous power and popularity of the media, especially tv. In contemporary America, young children seem to favor their televisions over siblings and friends, often over their fathers and sometimes, even over their mothers. The "popular," whatever its economic and ideological, effects may be, seems to work at yet another level (the affective) and in fact, the very notion of popularity (which entails certain kinds of investment of energy, e.g., enjoyment) seems to signal the unequal--and perhaps even unsual--weight of the affective. I want then, to read, across the broad landscape of American popular culture, television as billboards for certain affective structures that emerge from and impact upon every level of contemporary social life. Rather than talking about particular programs or episodes, I want to talk about certain practices, gestures or statements (Foucault) that appear, in numerous forms, across different media and forms. The question is how they function in the affective economy of the popular, what they are "announcing" to us on tv once we begin to follow the highways.

In fact, I want to talk about three related sets of such

gestures: irony, repetition and excess, and the three forms of in-difference which they announce. The gesture and the annunciation are inseparable on the billboard. I have already said some things about the in-difference of television. To put it most bluntly, tv is in-different to differences even as it is constructs differences out of the very absence of difference. I have also said something about the first of these billboard's--the particular forms of media irony by which the media declare the in-difference of reality. In a certain sense, everything becomes equal on tv (e.g., the late night talk show) by apparently erasing the line between image and reality. But it is not the case that everything is appropriated to become a media object; rather, their reality depends upon their already being such an image, speaking the discourses of tv. The A-Team can bring together, all battling on the side of justice (and America), B. A. Barrakas (aka Mr.T, as a quasi-guerrilla), Hulk Hogan (a wrestler) and William "The Refrigerator" Perry (a football star). And at the end of the episode, as if to remind us that the line between tv and reality is problematic, "Refrig" gives that weeks' victims (now saved by the A-Team, Hulk and Refrig) a Chicago Bears hat, but B.A. and Hulk are quite annoyed at not having received their own. Moreover, in a few weeks, all of them will appear in a closed circuit, internationally broadcast wrestling extravaganza. More radically, consider the list of guest stars from programs like Miami Vice, which has included not only rock and roll stars but politicians (negotations are under way with Bush, and Kissinger and Ford have

already appeared on Dynasty), criminals (G. Gordon Liddy), business figures (Lee Iacocca), columnists (Bob Greene), artists (Julian Beck), etc. The intersection of tv and reality, tv's indifference to reality, is marked everywhere on the screen (wrestling, comedy, the popularity of Bill Cosby, Reagan) but nowhere so beautifully as by contemporary advertisements: in one particularly apt commercial for caffeine free Pepsi, we are shown scenes of life in tv-land while the voice over says, "for those whose life is already exciting enough." The point is not that the line has disappeared or that tv is somehow erasing it, but rather, that its effectivity is being changed by television's in-difference to it.

A second moment of television's in-difference, an in-difference of identity or meaning, is announced over and over again in the various forms of repetition that tv practices. It is the peculiar way in which television deals with the difference between the same and the different. One can recall Andy Warhol's attempt to distinguish his enjoyment in seeing the exact same thing over and over from the everyday pleasures of seeing almost the same thing over and over. But the distinction quickly collapses. At every level, television seems to be structured on repetition: episodes, character types, narratives, program genres, programming (e.g., reruns and repeats), ads. Television is, at all these levels, the most predictable set of images one can imagine. Yet there are differences: whether one prime time soap looks just like another, whether one episode of Miami Vice says the exact same thing as every other, somehow the pleasure of the viewing depends upon the ability to renegotiate the

difference that difference makes. Baudrillard has pointed to the implosion of difference in the media and argued that, as a result, the media are indifferent to meaning. This is an argument against those who attempt to see reality represented in the media, or who attempt to understand the media's power in its repetition of (what is apparently almost always) the same message. Rather, I would argue that tv is in-different to meaning, i.e., that meaning is necessary but irrelevant; that tv moves through meaning to get somewhere else, and it doesn't particularly matter what meanings it uses. Its minimalism, its often cartoonish sense of reality is quite allowable because the point is not to communicate particular meanings as if they were structures to be lived in and experienced. Moreover, television does not need to worry about the line between realism and fantasy; it presents images of the in-difference of meaning, fantasy and reality (which is not to say that the viewer confuses these domains).

If the popularity of tv programs is not immediately dependent on ideological issues (e.g., a recent Feiffer cartoon of a woman in front of the tv: "Ronald Reagan talks to me on television. No nonsense . . . and sincere. Who cares if he's lying?"), perhaps we can get some grip on it by looking at a third set of gestures common, not only to tv, but to the range of popular media, namely, excess, which announces an in-difference of the norm (even as television constantly reinscribes it). Televisual excess takes many forms--visual excess, stylistic excess, verbal excess, imagistic excess (especially in its images

of violence, wealth and sexual tittilation), etc. But perhaps most important is what one might call the emotional excess, which is made possible by tv's in-difference to meaning and reality. Current tv's most most powerful annunication is its emotionalism, the fact that it is structured by a series of movements between extreme highs and extreme lows. In fact, it presents an image of an affective economy marked on the one side by an extreme (postmodern) cynicism ("life is hard and then you die") and, on the other, by an almost irrational celebration of the possibilities of winning against all odds. Often, these two are combined, as in the Miami Vice genre. While it is hard to know whether tv or reality is crazier and more unreal, it is clear that tv is the site of emotions more "real," and more intense than those we can comfortably claim for ourselves. It is almost as if, in various ways, tv viewers get to live out the emotional highs and lows of their lives on tv, as if they just want to feel something that strongly, no matter what it is ("I'd rather feel bad than not feel anything at all"), to feel what it's like to believe in something that strongly regardless of what it is ("I believe in the truth though I lie a lot"). And this does not require any simple identification, either with the camera (for we allow it to move as if by proxy), the characters (for they are typical and yet unlike us), or the narrative uncertainty (for one always knows how it will end).

Baudrillard argues that, with the implosion of difference, the indifference of meaning, reality too has collapsed into its model. The subject, the social, the political--all have become simulacra, located in a logic of deterrence which has redefined

the operation of power. But Baudrillard confuses the collapse of an ideology of the real (including its various scenes) with the problematizing of the link between ideology and reality. Again, it is not the social that has imploded but a particular ideological structuration (private/public) which seems no longer effective. Baudrillard makes the real into nothing but an effect of meaning so that when meaning collapses, the real must as well. But if, as I have argued, reality is more than meaning ("wild realism"), and if in fact meaning has not disappeared but merely been rearticulated into different relations within certain historical structures, then Baudrillard is less an analyst of our historical condition than another of its many billboards. Increasingly, reading Baudrillard is no different than watching Miami Vice (as one friend told me, "I dress like Vice, I talk like Baudrillard. Again, there is no guarantee that this signals the commodification of knowledge rather than the emergence of new forms of popular intellect.). The social may not be meaningfully invoked (it may have lost its "existential" meaning) but that doesn't mean it is not still effectively constituted through other discursive effects. It is easly to lose sight of this gap when reading Baudrillard, just as it is when watching Miami Vice, because his writing, like the world he celebrates moves so quickly that nothing is allowed to impinge upon it, nothing can break its slippery surface.

In particular, the televisual practices of excess point to an emerging historical contradiction between affect and ideology. If the relation between the two is normally anaclitic, the

postwar years have seen it broken. That is, at least a part of the structures of hypermodernism is marked by a series of events which challenged our ability to make sense of our relationship to our world and ourselves, to normalcy and the future. Not the least important of these events was the incorporation of such apocalyptic images into the mass media and popular culture. While history seemed to demand a different structure of affective investment, there seemed to be no way of making sense of the emerging struggle.

What apppeared was a crisis in the relationship between common sense and faith. Within this gap, it is not the case that one doesn't live ideological values (or that nothing matters) but that these seem not to speak to our affective mood. It is as if one were to experience and in certain ways live values without actually investing in them (it doesn't matter what matters) because our affective investments seem to have already been determined elsewhere, in another scene. This structure--whether it has its own tradition or not--seems to have become increasingly dominant, a common announcement on our cultural billboards: images of the contradiction between contemporary affective organizations and the ideological appeals which attempt to articulate them. Thus, happiness becomes an impossible but necessary reality (a bit like deja vu with amnesia) or rather, its possible ideological relevance collapses into its extreme affective images. It is as if our ideological maps and our "mattering maps" were unable to intersect, unable to articulate one another. Each continues to exist with its own autonomy, although our sanity apparently demands their integration. It is

no longer a matter of seeking, in culture, to articulate the new organization of our affective relations to reality (as in much of high modernism) but rather, of locating the site of the contradiction itself (pose-modernism).

Television announces that site in its own performance of indifference, in its practices of irony, repetition and excess. It does more, however, for it also offers, in the pleasures of its viewing, a strategic response to the contradiction between affect and ideology by placing it within an affective democracy which is, I believe, constitutive of almost all of the televisual apparatuses. In this particular economy, every image is equally open to affective investment because everything is a media event, a style, a pose. This doesn't mean that we don't live certain poses, or that we don't have to. But it also does not mean that we necessarily live in their ideological spaces even though we might speak some of their languages. The particular democratic form of this economy responds to the broad ideological demands of subjectification and commodification. Both, as constant social positionings with their own pleasures and pains, negate the indifference of affect, and thus ultimately, the power of affect itself. Tv re-establishes a site of and source for affective living within its democratic economy. It does this by constituting an empowering form of identity--the mundane exotic. It celebrates the ordinariness of the exotic and the exoticism of the ordinary. It locates identity in the absence of any difference by affectively investing in the difference of the same.[4] Thus, the televisual star system is radically unlike the

classic Hollywood version, for the contemporary star is, in most cases, necessarily like us in ways that violate the code of the Hollywood star system. Their fantastic difference is affectively empowered (as style and chance) and is effective only at that level.[5]

Obviously, the economy I have described is precisely that which is often attacked by many of television's ideological critics. But I have tried at least to imply that this economy may be an empowering one for many of its viewers precisely because it is not ideological. Tv is a domestic medium; but it need not constantly domesticate every image, nor is it already domesticated, without any role in ongoing cultural struggles. Tv is domestic in that it is in-different to the difference between subordination and resistance. It is both immensely public and intensely private and once again, its power lies precisely on the line which marks the in-difference. Television is not often an active site of struggle but that does not mean it is not involved, in important and constant ways, through indirection, in active struggles.

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## Notes

1
I would like to thank Jon Crane for his valuable comments many of which are incorporated into this paper.

2It is interesting to note that what counts as acceptable behavior in cinemas is changing, presumably in response, not only to the normalization of films on television, but also to the incorporation of televisual practices, e.g., the inclusion of advertising before the feature, and most recently, the practice of leaving the lights on until the feature itself begins.

3
There are three different versions of this: Williams' flow, Ellis' rereading which emphasizes the segmentality of the flow, or Føster's polarization of tv practices into fragmentation/fetishization and flow/consumption.

4
Some of the argument presented here is derived from my work on rock and roll. While both, as popular media, operate in what I call an affective economy determined largely by the postwar contradiction between affect and ideology, the forms of their economies are radically distinct. If tv responds to the general structure of subjectification/commodification, rock and roll responds to the narrower structure of terror/boredom. If tv constitutes an affective democracy within which the mundane exotic relocates identity, rock and roll constitutes an affective elitism built upon investments in "fun." (This is not to deny significant overlaps between the two economies: e.g., tv may be fun at times and rock and roll may build mundane exotic identities, but they are not dominant or determining in quite the same ways).

5
Thus it is easy to see how a movie star could become a politician/ideologue. But a tv star? And it is easy to see why an ideologue could (and even has to) become a tv star? But a movie star?